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When her daughter Alyssa was born with Down syndrome, for Sydney mother Melissa Cotterill, the first steps as a family were the hardest.

‘When Alyssa was born, and she was diagnosed with Down syndrome, it was the fear of the unknown that scared me the most, but information and awareness are key factors to overcoming that fear.’

While still in hospital, a visit from a Down Syndrome (DS) NSW parent support worker helped ease Melissa’s fears. And it was DS NSW who encouraged Melissa to seek support from the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS).

Alyssa, 16, has a range of NDIS supports including speech and occupational therapy, exercise physiology and a support worker.

‘The NDIS helps Alyssa to have a full life. Her supports assist Alyssa to achieve her goals so she is more independent in the future,’ Melissa said.

‘One of her goals is to improve on her communication skills and a speech therapist helps Alyssa with that, which will improve her social skills and ability to make friends.

‘A key goal for Alyssa, like any teenager, is to make friends. So we’ve got a support worker who helps her with getting out in the community.

‘They go out with Alyssa and help her with managing her money at the shops.

‘The occupational therapist helps Alyssa with strength and fine motors skills, such as handling cutlery.’

Since joining the Scheme in 2019, Alyssa now has more independence and her confidence levels have increased to the point she can pursue more of her hobbies.

Alyssa, in Year 11, attends a weekly dance class through her school and has found a new love in dragon boating.

‘She came up and said to me “Mum, I’ve finally found my thing”,’ Melissa said. ‘As a parent, you just want your child to be happy and be involved in activities they are confident in doing, so it was amazing to hear that.’

Melissa juggles parenting duties with husband, Michael, while serving as a co-ordinator for DS NSW’s Up Up and Away program.

The program is a monthly social group for children with Down syndrome aged 4-17, their siblings and parents.

She also works with the organisation's Prenatal/New Babies and Health areas, where she provides support and information to new parents who have a baby born with Down syndrome.

'One of the most important things is for a chance for parents of children with Down syndrome to come together and network,' Melissa said. 'You can learn so much from other parents.'

Melissa hopes for Alyssa's growing independence to continue to the point where she can be in paid employment.

'She'd love to work in kindergartens, teaching kids language development and how to sign, which has helped Alyssa immensely from a very early age,' she said.

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